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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4253
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
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RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000213

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA/CEN
AID/W FOR ASIA/EA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [KDEM](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: MEJLIS OPEN TO COOPERATION ON LOCAL GOVERNANCE

REF: A. ASHGABAT 09-1006

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¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a February 3 meeting with the visiting EUR/ACE delegation Mejlis (Parliament) Speaker Akja Nurberdiyeva said local self-governing councils, which are subordinated to Parliament, realized that they should support the \$4 billion national program for rural development. One of the biggest challenges faced by these local structures was working with hakimliks (provincial and sub-provincial governments). In the past, the central government and hakimliks prioritized local development projects without significant inputs from local councils, but these bodies were now involved in identifying and requesting priority projects. Nurberdiyeva expressed a positive view of the body's cooperation with UN Development Program (UNDP) on issues related to local governance, but also indicated that she remained interested in cooperation with USAID's new Local Development Initiative to build their financial management capacity. English language training for parliamentary deputies was another priority. Nurberdiyeva deferred questions on NGOs registration in Turkmenistan to the Ministry of Justice (Adalat) while agreeing that the number should "not be fixed." END SUMMARY.

"WE'RE WAITING" FOR USAID'S LOCAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

¶3. (U) In response to EUR/ACE delegation head Maria Longi's question regarding potential cooperation on local governance issues, Mejlis (Parliament) Speaker Akja Nurberdiyeva indicated that its ongoing program with UNDP, which had served to activate local governments, was recently extended through 2015. Local self-governing councils, which are subordinated to Parliament, realized that they should support the \$4 billion national program for rural development, but one of their biggest challenges was working with hakimliks (provincial and sub-provincial governments). In the past, the central government and hakimliks prioritized local development projects without significant inputs from local councils, but these local bodies were now involved in identifying and requesting priority projects.

¶4. (U) Local councils do not have access to significant funds currently, but could appeal to hakimliks for specific projects in cases of emergency. The speaker foresaw local councils having their

own funds in the future, but members needed to be trained on how to use funds from other sources. Two areas of interest were training on using non-budget sources and supporting the interagency commission, which was composed of ministries and parliamentary deputies, to develop sources of funds.

¶15. (U) Referencing positive cooperation with USAID's recently concluded Community Empowerment Project (Ref. A), Nurberdiyeva said that she was looking forward to meeting with representatives of USAID's new Local Development Initiative. Stating she was not sure whether the delay was due to Parliament or USAID's side, she said that she was ready to meet with project representatives to discuss potential areas of cooperation. USAID Country Representative provided a brief overview of the project and proposed a more substantive meeting in early March during the planned visit by the project's Chief of Party.

DEPUTIES NEED IMPROVED ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS

¶16. (U) Responding to Longi's question on the need for English language training, Nurberdiyeva quickly replied, "All our deputies are waiting!" English language was very important for deputies, since they have experienced a growing need for interactions with other parliamentary delegations.

¶17. (U) Turkmenistan's constitution was amended in September 2008 and Parliament was expanded from 65 to 125 deputies. President Berdimuhamedov had taken many other positive steps, such as revising laws and drafting of new laws, in order to reflect the new reality in Turkmenistan. The increase in Parliament's size reflects an increase in its responsibility. Turkmenistan's Parliament received assistance from various sources and studied international experience through the internet, which is used in drafting laws that reflect local specifics. Although not all Turkmenistan's citizens had the

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skills necessary to interact with members of Parliament, deputies used simple language to explain laws to people.

NUMBER OF NGOS "SHOULDN'T BE FIXED"

¶18. (U) Following on the discussion about citizen engagement with deputies, USAID Regional Mission Director asked how the population's views were solicited. Also, the number of NGOs in Turkmenistan appeared to have remained constant for several years, so he questioned whether the number of registered NGOs should also increase in light of the expanded parliament. To the latter, Nurberdiyeva replied that this question was part of a national process, but "...whatever the number (of NGOs), it shouldn't be fixed." Possibilities for new NGOs depended on the local population and its interests, but the Ministry of Justice was the best source of information on this subject.

¶19. (U) On citizen engagement with deputies, each district had a special room for meeting with population. There were monthly meetings between members of Parliament and hakims (governors). Parliament very much valued inputs from citizens. It strived to inform the population about new laws so that it could determine if new laws would work. When the Cabinet of Ministers drafted laws, they were checked with population, too. Many recent laws like the Family and Housing Codes, for example, really concerned the population. Furthermore, construction of many objects, like sports complexes, stadiums, libraries, museums and theaters, were being undertaken to promote balanced development, which would help to avoid problems like drug use and smoking.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: Nurberdiyeva's positive comments about possible cooperation with USAID on local government strengthening were welcomed, since she has been reluctant to engage with USG programs in the past. English-language training presents another opportunity for the USG to provide cooperation and engage in a non-threatening way. The Speaker's deferral to the Ministry of Justice (Adalat) on the question of NGO registration, however, showed her continuing reluctance to substantively engage on difficult issues. END COMMENT.

